

The Year At The Playhouse

By Harry Le Grande.

"O, there be players that I have seen play, have so strutted and bellowed, that I thought some of nature's journeymen had made them, they imitated humanity so abominably."—Hamlet.

When Hamlet spoke the above lines, he used prophetic words, for surely the melancholy Dane must have caught a glimpse of this, the year of our Lord, 1905. From the box-office standpoint the year has been plethoric. Looked at from other points of view—at players and plays—the past twelve months have been somewhat disproportionate.

Never before in the history of old Salt Lake has so much money been poured into the coffers of the playhouses. With the tide of prosperity rising higher and higher, astute managers have taken it at the flood and with it floated on to fortune. The auditorium has been generous, but has the stage been equal in its merit? In a general sense, surely not, in a few instances, decidedly yes. Nobody, however, blames the managers—our local managers, at least—because conditions were such as they have been. Things have come our way, not through any local conspiracy, but because the rails were greased elsewhere, and, at the drop of the flag, "they were off," before the fool-killer had time to wake up.

Nor can this condition be ascribed to a scarcity of stars—big actors and actresses—for the sky hereabouts has fairly played with matured and budding genius. Indeed the theatric sky has had a Milky-way of closely crowded stars. One engagement after another has scattered star-dust all along the line. The greatest disappointment has not been the lack of new material, either, for that also has been provided as never before. The main trouble has been the poor quality of the productions themselves. But, while mediocrity has stalked the stage—"strutted and bellowed"—it has, more than of yore, obtruded itself in the lines and situations of the drama. So, if Hamlet had used the word "plays" instead of "players," as quoted in the beginning of this article, its special reference to 1905 could not be doubted.

It has often been said, "the play's the thing," and there is truth in every syllable of the declaration. No matter what the ability of an actor, or the personality of an actress, there must be some vehicle in which to ride, else there be an awkward creaking of cheap shoes. Take Florence Roberts in Paul Armstrong's play, "Ann Lamont." There are others, I know, but this will serve. At the time, I criticized this drama sufficiently to indicate my poor opinion of its claim to anything above the commonplace. Indeed its construction showed more than the usual paucity of strong situations and opportunity for climaxes. What could Miss Roberts do, left as she was distressingly between the expected which did not happen and the unlooked-for which was ever present? As a result, Miss Roberts, shorn of her winged chances, failed to reach her legitimate heights. She was, because of this, unjustly criticised by a press previously disposed in her favor. The general impression made by Miss Roberts was undeniably to her disadvantage as an actress. But, the reason for it all, as I saw it, was, not because she was less the artiste, but because Mr. Armstrong had failed to hold his own mirror at the proper angle. Indeed the play's the thing, and if "Ann Lamont" had been a creature with backbone and red blood,

Miss Roberts would have risen to real possibilities with the boldness which makes genius unafraid. I am not posing as an apologist for Miss Roberts—her previous good work is sufficient answer. An actress who can successfully measure her dramatic stature as "Za Za" with Mrs. Leslie Carter and her "Sappho" with Olga Nethersole, need not go beyond an intelligent audience for her vindication.

I greatly admire Miss Roberts as an actress, and I believe there is reason in my madness. Even if she fails to reach the pinnacle demanded by the New York critics, in her coming engagement, there can be no lowering of the esteem she has won in the big-hearted, generous West. Perhaps I have dwelt unnecessarily upon this matter, but from a certain point of view, the subject matter is worth more than a passing notice. Among the big things, among the dramatic mole-hills of the year was Dustin Farnum in "The Virginian." Dustin Farnum, ever since he first came here as the dashing "Denton" in "Arizona," has not only filled the eyes of Salt Lake matinee girls, but the less emotional, who read between the lines, have read the coming fortunes of this promising young actor. When Charles Frohman stars him, as is proposed next year, Mr. Farnum should step at once from a somewhat provincial obscurity into the spot light of widened prominence.

During the year Margaret Anglin committed the unpardonable by appearing here in "Zira" before New York and San Francisco had seen what really proved to be a lukewarm rehash of Wilkie Collins' forgotten "New Magdalene." But even Gotham is now clapping its hands over "Zira." What a fickle dame Broadway is! She turned her proud back on Nance O'Neil—the darling of the West—and welcomes Margaret Anglin with extravagant hysteria. We among the crags and peaks of the wild and woolly can never quite understand the dramatic inclinations of those who frequent the playhouses on Broadway.

Many a play has been damned with faint praise by the New York critics which received a warm reception in the West, and we here have sung the merits of a drama which there has frozen the East river with its cold reception. If Stoddart—glorious, old man Stoddart—had not visited us during the year many a weeping hoop would have been hung upon "The Bonnie Briar Bush" and Zion would have been disconsolate. But dear Stoddart came and we lifted up our hearts in song as we rushed to the ticket window.

All along the line there has been a coming and going of stage personalities—actors who appealed to femininity, actresses who had charms for masculinity—such as John Drew, Chauncey Olcott, Ethel Barrymore and May Irwin. Each of them appeared in chilly plays, but the personality of the performers insured a warm reception. And the least substantial of all, "Mrs. Black is Back,"—was a clear revelation of the possibilities of personality. Its dramatic infirmity would have been sadly smashed by the avoirdupois of the bulbous May, had not the Irwin personality supported it with two strong understudies—of which we said nothing, but suspected much. Of musical shows there has been, as Hogheimer says in "The Girl from Kays," a sufficiency. I had fondly hoped last season that Apollo would take offense and break his hoop over some of the musical show heads. This season, however, there has been a still greater flood of cheap music running

through stained glasses. From the ticklish "Red Feather," with statuesque Grace Van Studdiford in a revelation of generous tights and saucy hat-plume, to the tuneful charm of the "Prince of Pilsen," we have heard all the tingling tummy-tunes of which disordered musical genius is capable. I must note, however, an exception—an exceptional exception—in the appearance of our own sweet-voiced troubadours in the "Jolly Musketeer." And, be it further said, the home company was so far above the "Tenderfoot," "Buster Brown" aggregation—and others, too—as to make comparison not only odious, but odoriferous.

One of the saving graces of the numerous musical shows we have seen, was the comeliness of the various choruses.

Nearly everywhere in the desert of the musical shows grew pretty flowers of show girls, who, although like the lilies of the field, sang not neither could they dance, were, nevertheless, a constant visionary charm to the Front Row club. The genies of George Ade, hardly more than suspected last season, has been amplified during the year. While his "Sultan of Sulu" is a study in oriental imbecility, with chop-suey music, the "Sho Gun" fairly pointed the way to a return to dignified light opera, with, of course, apologies to the late firm of Gilbert and Sullivan. But Ade's forte is in the drama. His "College Widow" scored a positive touch-down, not only with the foot-ball scene, but throughout the play, and most justly so at the box-office. Keep your eye on this Hoosier lad—he has more good things coming our way.

That boys may be the sons of their father without further responsibility in a dramatic way, was shown in the visit of the Jefferson brothers in "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Rivals"—two immortal plays, with nobody left to play them. If there were a stage censorship in America, the Jefferson boys would be harmless in the future.

What business have they to tarnish the lustre of their matchless father? Blood may be thicker than water, but inherited genius—dramatic genius—is often thinner than milk. During the year, Shakespeare, too frequently treated like a Cinderella among the ashes of shameful neglect, received a Prince Charming awakening from Sothorn and Marlowe. "Romeo and Juliet" was given with a youthful impetuosity and passionate tenderness never before seen upon a Salt Lake stage. It was the red letter night of the day upon which it was given and gave dramatic distinction to the whole year. Louis James has just left us, and although his efforts are not sufficiently appreciated, he is doing his classical best to keep alive the heavenly flame of the higher drama. While the acting of Mr. James is tinged with austerity and lacking in the rare sympathetic elements to which an audience responds, yet he is entitled to gratitude from all lovers of the best traditions of the stage. In the past season the fad for dramatized novels has kept pace with the year before, but in no way has it been more insistent. At one time the fad had assumed alarming proportions—it threatened to thwart originality in playwriting. But we may always expect to see the pages of a popular book illustrated with foot-light flashes.

So again the readers of "The Pit," "The Virginian" and "When Knighthood Was in Flower," have been routed from their cozy-corners and rushed to see their bloodless heroes under the spot-lights. The cartoons, also, have been torn from the papers and issued in yellow extras from the stage. To what extent will this craze run? Perhaps it is merciful that few are privileged to peep into the future. May the gods spare us the Breakfast food drama and the Chewing gum

comedy! Such, in brief, is the record of the year in local theatricals. I have made no attempt to give the stage offerings in the order of their appearance, nor have I attempted to mention everything we have seen. Such an undertaking would be more a work of effort than a labor of love.

The running comments I have made upon plays and players are, of course, nothing more than personal opinions. And, while much that I have said may be wrong and little of it right—from your point of view—you must "censure me in your wisdom," making due allowance for the frailties of human judgment. The picture, while not painted in altogether pleasing colors, is still rainbow hued and the frame not entirely made of cheap gilding—such a composite dramatic picture could hardly be otherwise.

If the mission of the theatre is to amuse, its efforts have been more than partially successful. But if it be the province of the playhouse to instruct, it surely has, during the past year, been an indifferent teacher. In either case, however, Salt Lakers, like their brethren elsewhere, may note the distinction without paying much attention to the difference.

Life is too short to cavil at little things—the fate of empire does not hover over flickering foot-lights. But there are times when our tired selves cry out for the rest and relief of diversion. Weary with the toil and drudgery of the day, we seek at night, like thirsty pilgrims, the limpid streams of recreation—the theatres with their running brooks of laughter, play and tears.

FIRST LOS ANGELES LIMITED.

The first Los Angeles Limited of the Salt Lake-Union Pacific-Northwestern line, passed through on Tuesday. General Passenger Agent Lomax of the Union Pacific had a party of Eastern newspaper men with him and at this point Kenneth C. Kerr joined the party to help entertain during the trip over and in Los Angeles. A great programme has been arranged for the pleasure of the guests at Riverside, Los Angeles, Pasadena and Catalina.

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